A. E. VAN VOGT

The Witch

From where he sat, half hidden by the scraggly line of bushes, Marson watched the old woman. It was minutes now since he had stopped reading. The afternoon air hung breathless around him. Even here, a cliff's depth away from the sparkling tongue of sea that curled among the rocks below, the heat was a material thing, crushing at his strength.

But it was the letter in his pocket, not the blazing sunlight, that weighed on Marson's mind. Two days now since that startling letter had arrived; and he still hadn't the beginning of the courage necessary to ask for an explanation.

Frowning uncertainly—unsuspected—unsuspecting—he watched.

The old woman basked in the sun. Her long, thin, pale head drooped in sleep. On and on she sat, moveless, an almost shapeless form in her black sack of a dress.

The strain of looking hurt his eyes; his gaze wandered; embraced the long, low, tree-protected cottage with its neat, white garage and its aloneness there on that high, green hill overlooking the great spread of city. Marson had a brief, cozy sense of privacy—then he turned back to the old woman.

For a long moment, he stared unshaken at the spot where she had been. He was conscious of a dim, intellectual surprise, but there was not a real thought in his head. After a brief period, he grew aware of the blank, and he thought:

Thirty feet to the front door from where she had been sitting; and she would have had to cross his line of vision to get there.

An old woman, perhaps ninety, perhaps a hundred or more, an incredibly old woman, capable of moving—well thirty feet a minute.

Marson stood up. There was a searing pain where an edge of the sun had cut into his shoulders. But that passed. From his upright position, he saw that not a solitary figure was visible on the steeply mounting sidewalk. And only the sound of the sea on the rocks below broke the silence of that hot Saturday afternoon.

Where had the old wretch disappeared to?

The front door opened; and Joanna came out. She called to him:

"Oh, there you are, Craig. Mother Quigley was just asking where you were."

Marson came silently down from the cliff's edge. Almost meticulously, he took his wife's words, figuratively rolled them over in his mind, and found them utterly inadequate. The old woman couldn't have been just asking for him, because the old woman had NOT gone through that door and therefore hadn't asked anyone anything for the last twenty minutes.

At last an idea came. He said: "Where's Mother Quigley now?"

"Inside." He saw that Joanna was intent on the flower box of the window beside the door. "She's been knitting in the living room for the last half hour."

Amazement in him yielded to sharp annoyance. There was too damn much old woman in his mind since that letter had come less than forty-eight hours before. He drew it out, and stared bleakly at the scrawl of his name on the envelope.

It was simple enough, really, that this incredible letter had come to him. After the old woman's arrival nearly a year before, an unexpected nightmare, he had mentally explored all the possible reverberations that might accrue from her presence in his home. And the thought had come that, if she had left any debts in the small village where she had lived, he'd better pay them.

A young man, whose appointment to the technical school principalship had been severely criticized on the grounds of his youth, couldn't afford to have anything come back on him. And so a month before he had leisurely written the letter to which this was the answer.

Slowly, he drew the note from its envelope and once more reread the mindstaggering words in it:

Dear Mr. Marson:
As I am the only debtor, the postmaster handed me your letter; and I wish to state that, when your great grandmother died last year, I buried her myself and in my capacity as gravestone maker, I carved a stone for her grave. I did this at my own expense, being a God-fearing man, but if there is a relative, I feel you should bear cost of same, which is eighteen (18)' dollars. I hope to hear from you, as I need the money just now.

Pete Cole.

Marson stood for a long moment; then he turned to speak to Joanna—just in time to see her disappearing into the house. Once more undecided, he climbed to the cliff's edge, thinking:

The old scoundrel! The nerve of a perfect stranger of an old woman walking into a private home and pulling a deception like that.

His public situation being what it was, his only solution was to pay her way into an institution; and even that would require careful thought— Frowning blackly, he hunched himself deeper into his chair there on the cliff's edge, and deliberately buried himself in his book. It was not until much later that memory came of the way the old woman had disappeared from the lawn. Funny, he thought then, it really was damned funny.

The memory faded— Blankly sat the old woman.

Supper was over; and, because for years there had been no reserves of strength in that ancient body, digestion was an almost incredible process, an all-out affair.

She sat as one dead, without visible body movement, without thought in her brain; even the grim creature purpose that had brought her here to this house lay like a stone at the bottom of the black pool that was her mind.

It was as if she had always sat there in that chair by the window overlooking the sea, like an inanimate object, like some horrible mummy, like a wheel that, having settled into position, seemed now immovable.

After an hour, awareness began to creep into her bones. The creature mind of her, the strange, inhuman creature mind behind the parchmentlike, sharp-nosed mask of human flesh, stirred into life.

It studied Marson at the living room table, his head bent thoughtfully over the next term curriculum he was preparing. Toothless lips curled finally into a contemptuous sneer.

The sneer faded, as Joanna slipped softly into the room. Half-closed, letching eyes peered then, with an abruptly ravenous, beastlike lust at the slim, lithe, strong body. Pretty, pretty body, soon now to be taken over.

In the three-day period of the first new moon after the summer solstice . . . in nine days exactly— Nine days! The ancient carcass shuddered and wriggled ecstatically with the glee of the creature. Nine short days, and once again the age-long cycle of dynamic existence would begin. Such a pretty young body, too, capable of vibrant, world-ranging life— Thought faded, as Joanna went back into the kitchen. Slowly, for the first time, awareness came of the sea.

Contentedly sat the old woman. Soon now, the sea would hold no terrors, and the blinds wouldn't have to be down, nor the windows shut; she would even be able to walk along the shore at midnight as of old; and they, whom she had deserted so long ago, would once more shrink from the irresistible energy aura of her new, young body.

The sound of the sea came to her, where she sat so quietly; calm sound at first, almost gentle in the soft sibilation of each wave thrust. Farther out, the voices of the water were louder, more raucous, blatantly confident, but the meaning of what they said was blurred by the distance, a dim, clamorous confusion that rustled discordantly out of the gathering night.

Night!

She shouldn't be aware of night falling, when the blinds were drawn.

With a little gasp, she twisted toward the window beside which she sat. Instantly, a blare of hideous fear exploded from her lips.

The ugly sound bellowed into Marson's ears, and brought him lurching to his feet. It raged through the door into the kitchen, and Joanna came running as if it was a rope pulling at her.

The old woman screeched on; and it was Marson who finally penetrated to the desire behind that mad terror.

"Good Lord!" he shrugged. "It's the windows and the blinds. I forgot to put them down when dusk fell."

He stopped, irritated, then: "Damned nonsense! I've a good mind to.—"

"For Heaven's sake!" his wife urged. "We've got to stop that noise. I'll take this side of the room; you take the windows next to her."

Marson shrugged again, acquiescently. But he was thinking: They wouldn't have this to put up with much longer. As soon as the summer holidays arrived, he'd make arrangements to put her in the Old Folks Home. And that would be that. Less than two weeks now.

His wife's voice broke almost sharply across the silence that came, as Mother Quigley settled back into her chair: "I'm surprised at you forgetting a thing like that. You're usually so thoughtful."

"It was so damned hot!" Marson complained.

Joanna said no more; and he went back to his chair. But he was thinking suddenly: Old woman who fears the sea and the night, why did you come to this house by the sea, where the street lamps are far apart and the nights are almost primevally dark?

The gray thought passed; his mind returned with conscientious intentness to the preparation of the curriculum.

Startled sat the old woman!

All the swift rage of the creature burned within her. That wretched man, daring to forget. And yet— ' 'You're usually so thoughtful!" his wife had said.

It was true. Not once in eleven months had he forgotten to look after the blinds— until today.

Was it possible that he suspected? That somehow, now that the time for the change was so near, an inkling of her purpose had dripped from her straining brain?

It had happened before. In the past, she had had to fight for her bodies against terrible, hostile men who had nothing but dreadful suspicion.

Jet-black eyes narrowed to pin points. With this man, there would have to be more than suspicion. Being what he was, practical, skeptical, cold-brained, not all the telepathic vibrations, nor the queer mind storms with their abnormal implications—if he had yet had any—would touch him or remain with him of themselves. Nothing but facts would rouse this man.

What facts? Was it possible that, in her intense concentrations of thought, she had unwittingly permitted images to show? Or had he made inquiries?

Her body shook, and then slowly purpose formed: She must take no chances.

Tomorrow was Sunday, and the man would be home. So nothing was possible. But Monday— That was it. Monday morning while Joanna slept—and Joanna always went back to bed for an hour's nap after her husband had gone to work—on Monday morning she would slip in and prepare the sleeping body so that, seven days later, entry would be easy.

No more wasting time trying to persuade Joanna to take the stuff voluntarily. The silly fool with her refusal of home remedies, her prating of taking only doctors' prescriptions.

Forcible feeding would be risky—but not half so risky as expecting this wretched, doting wreck of a body to survive another year.

Implacable sat the old woman.

In spite of herself, she felt the toll of the hours of anticipation. At Monday breakfast, she drooled with the inner excitement of her purpose. The cereal fell from her misshaped mouth, milk and saliva splattered over the tablecloth—and she couldn't help it. Old hands shook, mouth quivered; in everything her being yielded to that dreadful anility of body. Better get to her room before— With a terrible start, she saw that the man was pushing clear of the table, and there was such a white look on his face that she scarcely needed his words, as he said:

"There's something I've been intending to say to Mother Quigley' '—his voice took on a rasping note—' 'and right now, when I'm feeling thoroughly disgusted, is a darned good time to say it."

"For Heaven's sake, Craig' '—Joanna cut in, sharply; and the old woman snatched at the interruption, and began queasily to get to her feet—"what's made you so irritable these last few days? Now, be a good lover and go to school. Personally, I'm not going to clean up this mess till I've had my nap, and I'm certainly not going to let it get me down. 'By."

A kiss; and she was gone into the hallway that led to the bedrooms. Almost instantly, she vanished into the master bedroom; and then, even as the old woman struggled desperately to get farther out of her chair, Marson was turning to her, eyes bleak and determined.

Cornered, she stared up at him like a trapped animal, dismayed by the way this devilish body had betrayed her in an emergency, distorted her will. Marson said:

"Mother Quigley—I shall continue to call you that yet for the moment—I have received a letter from a man who claims to have carved a stone for the body he himself buried in your grave. What I would like to know is this: Who is occupying that grave? I—"

It was his own phrasing that brought Marson to startled silence. He stood strangely taut, struck rigid by a curious, alien horror, unlike anything he had ever known. For a long, terrible moment, his mind seemed to lie naked and exposed to the blast of an icy inner wind that whirled at him out of some nether darkness.

Thoughts came, a blare of obscene mental vaporings, unwholesome, black with ancient, incredibly ancient evil, a very seething mass of unsuspected horrors.

With a start he came out of that grisly world of his own imagination, and grew aware that the old crone was pouring forth harsh, almost eager words:

"It wasn't me that was buried. There were two of us old ones in the village; and when she died, I made her face to look like mine, and mine to look like hers, and I took her money and . . . I used to be an actress, you know, and I could use make-up. That's how it was, yes, yes, make-up; that's the whole explanation, and I'm not what you think at all, but just an old woman who was poor. That's all, just an old woman to be pitied—"

She would have gone on endlessly if the creature-logic in her had not, with dreadful effort, forced her quiet. She stood, then, breathing heavily, conscious that her voice had been too swift, too excited, her tongue loose with the looseness of old age, and her words had damned her at every syllable.

It was the man who brought surcease to her desperate fear; the man saying explosively:

"Good heavens, woman, do you mean to stand there and tell me you did a thing like that—"

Marson stopped, overwhelmed. Every word the old woman had spoken had drawn him further back from the strange, unsettling morass of thoughts that had briefly flooded his mind, back into the practical world of his own reason—and his own ethics. He felt almost physically shocked, and it was only after a long moment that he was able to go on. He said finally, slowly:

"You actually confess to the ghoulish deed of disfiguring a dead body for the purpose of stealing its money. Why that's—"

His voice collapsed before that abyss of unsuspected moral degradation. Here was a crime of the baser sort, an unclean, revolting thing that, if it was ever found out, would draw the censure of an entire nation, and ruin any school principal alive.

He shuddered; he said hastily: "I haven't the time to go into this now but—"

With a start, he saw that she was heading toward the hallway that led to her bedroom. More firmly, he called: "And there's another thing. Saturday afternoon, you were sitting out on the lawn—"

A door closed softly. Behind it, the old woman stood, gasping from her exertions, but with a growing conviction of triumph. The silly stupid man still didn't suspect. What did she care what he thought of her. Only seven days remained; and if she could last them, nothing else mattered.

The danger was that her position would become more difficult every day. That meant—when the time came, a quick entry would be absolutely necessary. That meant—the woman's body must be prepared now!

Joanna, healthy Joanna, would already be asleep. So it was only a matter of waiting for that miserable husband to get out. She waited— The sweet sound came at last from the near distance—the front door opening and then shutting. Like a stag at bay, the old woman quivered; her very bones shook with the sudden, sickish thrill of imminent action. If she failed, if she was discovered— Some preparation she had made to offset such a disaster but— The spasm of fear passed. With a final, reassuring fumble into the flat, black bosom of her dress, where the little bag of powder hung open, she glided forth.

For the tiniest instant, she paused in the open doorway of Joanna's bedroom. Her gimlet eyes dwelt with a glitter of satisfaction on the sleeping figure. And then— Then she was into the room.

The morning wind from the sea struck Marson like a blow, as he opened the door. He shut it with a swift burst of strength, and stood in the dully lighted hallway, indecisive.

It wasn't that he wasn't going out—there were too many things to do before the end of the school year; it was just that the abrupt resistance of the wind had crystallized a thought:

Ought he to go out without telling Joanna about the letter from the gravestone maker?

After all, the old woman now knew that he knew. In her cunning eagerness to defend herself and the security she must consider threatened, she might mention the subject to Joanna—and Joanna would know nothing.

Still undecided, Marson took several slow steps, then paused again just inside the living room. Damn it, the thing could probably wait till noon, especially as Joanna would be asleep by now. Even as it was, he'd have to go by car or streetcar if he hoped to reach the school at his usual early hour.

His thought twisted crazily, as the black form of the old woman glided ghostlike across the bedroom hallway straight into Joanna's room.

Senselessly, a yell quivered on Marson's lips—senselessly, because there was in him no reasoned realization of alienness. The sound froze unuttered because abruptly that icy, unnatural wind out of blackness was blowing again in his mind. Abnormal, primordial things echoed and raged—.—

He had no consciousness of running, but, suddenly, there was the open bedroom door, and there was the old woman—and at that last instant, though he had come with noiseless speed, the creature woman sensed him.

She jumped with a sheer physical dismay that was horrible to see. Her fingers that had been hovering over Joanna's mouth jerked spasmodically, and a greenish powder in them sprayed partly on the bed, mostly on the little rug beside the bed.

And then, Marson was on top of her. That loathsome mindwind was blowing stronger, colder; and in him was an utter, deadly conviction that demonic muscles would resist his strength to the limit. For a moment, that certainly prevailed even over reality.

For there was nothing.

Thin, bony arms yielded instantly to his devastatingly hard thrust; a body that was like old, rotten paper crumbled to the floor from his murderous rush.

For the barest moment, the incredibly easy victory gave Marson pause. But no astonishment could genuinely restrain the violence of his purpose or cancel that unnatural sense of unhuman things; no totality of doubt at this instant could begin to counterbalance his fury at what he had seen.

The old woman lay at his feet in a shapeless, curled-up blob. With a pitiless ferocity, a savage intent beyond any emotion he had ever known, Marson snatched her from the floor.

Light as long-decayed wood, she came up in his fingers, a dangling, inhuman, black-clothed thing. He shook it, as he would have shaken a monster; and it was then, when his destroying purpose was a very blaze of unreasoning intensity that the incredible thing happened.

Images of the old woman flooded the room. Seven old women, all in a row, complete in every detail, from black, sack-like dress to semi-bald head, raced for the door. Three exact duplicates of the old woman were clawing frantically at the nearest window. The eleventh replica was on her knees desperately trying to squeeze under the bed.

With an astounded gasp, brain whirling madly, Marson dropped the thing in his hands. It fell squalling, and abruptly the eleven images of the old woman vanished like figments out of a nightmare.

"Craig!"

In a dim way, he recognized Joanna's voice. But still he stood, like a log of wood, unheeding. He was thinking piercingly: That was what had happened Saturday on the lawn—an image of the old woman unwittingly projected by her furiously working mind, as she sat in the living room knitting.

Unwitting images had they been now, of a certainty. The old woman's desperately fearful mind seeking ways of escape.

God, what was he thinking? There was—there could be nothing here but his own disordered imagination.

The thing was impossible.

"Craig, what is all this anyway? What's happened?"

He scarcely heard; for suddenly, quite clearly, almost calmly, his mind was coordinating around a single thought, simple, basic and temble:

What did a man do with a witch in A. D. 1942?

The hard thought collapsed as he saw, for the first time, that Joanna was halfsitting, half-kneeling in the taut position she had jerked herself into when she wakened. She was swaying the slightest bit, as if her muscle control was incomplete. Her face was creased with the shock of her rude awakening.

Her eyes, he saw, were wide and almost blank; and they were staring at the old woman. With one swift glance, he followed that rigid gaze—and alarm struck through him.

Joanna had not wakened till the old woman screamed. She hadn't seen the images at all.

She would have only the picture of a powerful, brutal young man standing menacingly over the moaning form of an old woman—and by Heaven he'd have to act fast.

"Look!" Marson began curtly. "I caught her putting a green powder on your lips and—"

It was putting the thing in words that struck him dumb. His mind reeled before the tremendous fact that a witch had tried to feed dope to Joanna—his Joanna! In some incomprehensible way, Joanna was to be a victim—and he must convince her now of the action they must take.

Before that purpose, rage fled. Hastily, he sank down on the bed beside Joanna.

Swiftly, he launched into his story. He made no mention of the images or of his own monstrous suspicions. Joanna was even more practical than he. It would only confuse the issue to let her get the impression that he was mad. He finished finally:

"I don't want any arguments. The facts speak for themselves. The powder alone damns her; the letter serves to throw enough doubt on her identity to relieve us of any further sense of obligation.

"Here's what we're going to do. First, I shall phone my secretary that I may not be in till late. Then I'll ring up the Old Folks Home. I have no doubt under normal conditions there are preliminaries to entry, but money ought to eliminate all red tape. We're getting rid of her today and—"

Amazingly, Joanna's laughter interrupted him, a wave of laughter that ended in a sharp, unnormal, hysterical note. Marson shook her.

"Darling," he began anxiously.

She pushed him away, scrambled off the bed, and knelt with a curious excitement beside the old woman.

"Mother Quigley," she started, and her voice was so high-pitched that Marson half-climbed to his feet. He sank down again, as she went on: "Mother Quigley, answer one question: That powder you

were placing in my mouth—was it that ground seaweed remedy of yours that you've been trying to feed me for my headaches?"

The flare of hope that came to the old woman nearly wrecked her brain. How could she have forgotten her long efforts to make Joanna take the powder voluntarily? She whispered:

"Help me to my bed, dearie. I don't think anything is broken, but I'll have to lie down . . . yes, yes, my dear, that was the powder. I was so sure it would help you. We women, you know, with our headaches, have to stick together. I shouldn't have done it of course but—"

A thought, a blaze of anxiety, struck her. She whimpered: "You won't let him send me away, will you? I know I've been a lot of trouble and—"

She stopped, because there was a queer look on Joanna's face; and enough was enough. Victory could be overplayed. She listened with ill-suppressed content as Joanna said swiftly:

"Craig, hadn't you better go? You'll be late."

Marson said sharply: "I want the rest of that weed powder. I'm going to have that stuff analyzed."

But he evaded his wife's gaze; and he was thinking, stunned: "I'm crazy. I was so dizzy with rage that I had a nightmare of hallucinations."

Wasn't it Dr. Lycoming who had said that the human mind must have racial memory that extended back to the nameless seas that spawned man's ancestors? And that under proper and violent stress, these memories of terror would return?

His shame grew, as the old woman's shaking fingers produced a little canvas bag. Without a word, he took the container, and left the room.

Minutes later, with the soft purr of his car throbbing in his ears, eyes intent on the traffic, the whole affair seemed as remote and unreal as any dream.

He thought: "Well, what next? I still don't want her around but—"

It struck him with a curious, sharp dismay that there was not a plan in his head.

Tuesday—the old woman wakened with a start, and lay very still. Hunger came, but her mind was made up. She would not dress or eat till after the man was gone to work, and she would not come out at noon, or after school hours, but would remain in this room, with the door shut whenever he was around.

Six days before she could act, six days of dragging minutes, of doubts and fears.

Wednesday at 4:30 p.m., Marson's fingers relaxed on the shining knob of the front door, as the laughter of women tinkled from inside; and memory came that he had been warned of an impending tea.

Like an unwelcome intruder, he slipped off down the street, and it was seven o'clock before he emerged from the "talkie" and headed silently homewards.

He was thinking for the hundredth time: "I saw those old woman images. I know I saw them. It's my civilized instinct that makes me want to doubt, and so keeps me inactive."

The evening paper was lying on the doorstep. He picked it up; and later, after a supper of left-over sandwiches and hot coffee, at least two hours later, a paragraph from a war editorial caught first his eyes, and then his mind.

The enemy has not really fooled us. We know that all his acts, directly or indirectly, have been anti-us. The incredible and fantastic thing is this knowing all we know and doing nothing.

If an individual had as much suspicion, as much evidence, that someone was going to murder him at the first opportunity, he would try to prevent the act from being committed; he would not wait for the full, bloody consummation.

The greater fact is that there will come a time when everything possible is too little, even all-out effort too late.

With a start, Marson allowed the paper to fall. The war angle was already out of his mind. Twice he had voted "no opinion" on public-opinion war polls, and that had been strictly true. A young man in the first throes of the responsibility of running a great school had no time for war or politics. Later perhaps— But the theme, the inmost meaning of that editorial, was for him, for his problem. Knowing what he knew and doing nothing.

Uneasily, but with sudden determination, he climbed to his feet. "Joanna," he began—and realized he was talking to an empty room.

He peered into the bedroom. Joanna lay on the bed, fully dressed, sound asleep. Marson's grimness faded into an understanding smile. Preparing that afternoon tea had taken its toll.

After an hour, she was still asleep, and so very quietly, very gently, he undressed her and put her to bed. She did not waken even when he kissed her good night.

Thursday: By noon, his mind was involved with a petty-larceny case, a sordid, miserable affair of a pretty girl caught stealing. He saw Kemp, the chemistry assistant, come in; and then withdraw quietly.

In abrupt fever of excitement, he postponed the unwelcome case, and hastened after Kemp. He found the man putting on his hat to go to lunch.

The young chemistry instructor's eyes lighted as they saw Marson, then he frowned.

"That green powder you gave me to analyze, Mr. Marson, it's been a tough assignment. I like to be thorough, you know."

Marson nodded. He knew the mettle of this man, which was why he had chosen him rather than his equally obliging chief. Kemp was young, eager; and he knew his subject.

"Go on," said Marson. -

"As you suggested," Kemp continued, "it was ground weed. I took it up to Biology Bill . . . pardon me, I mean Mr. Grainger."

In spite of himself, Marson smiled. There was a time when he had said "Biology Bill" as a matter of course.

"Go on," was all he said now.

"Grainger identified it as a species of seaweed, known as Hydrodendon Bareha."

"Any special effects if taken into the human system?" Marson was all casualness.

"No-o! It's not dangerous, if that's what you mean. Naturally, I tried it on the dog, meaning myself, and it's rather unpleasant, not exactly bitter but sharp."

Marson was silent. He wondered whether he ought to feel disappointed or relieved. Or what? Kemp was speaking again:

"I looked up its history, and, surprisingly, it has quite a history. You know how in Europe they make you study a lot of stuff about the old alchemists and all that kind of stuff, to give you an historical grounding~"

''Yes?''

Kemp laughed. “You haven’t got a witch around your place by any chance?”

“Eh!” The exclamation almost burned Marson’s lips. He fought hard to hide the tremendousness of that shock.

Kemp laughed again. “According to ‘Die Geschichte der Zauberinnen’ by the Austrian, Karl Gloeck, Hydrodendon Bareha is the modern name for the sinister witch’s weed of antiquity. I’m not talking about the special witches of our Christian lore, with their childish attributes, but the old tribe of devil’s creatures that came out of prehistory, regular full-blooded sea witches. It seems when each successive body gets old, they choose a young woman’s body, attune themselves~ to it by living with the victim, and take possession any time after midnight of the first full moon period following the 21St of June. Witch’s weed is supposed to make the entry easier. Gloeck says . . . why, what’s the matter, sir?”

His impulse, his wild and terrible impulse, was to babble the whole story to Kemp. With a gigantic effort, he stopped himself; for Kemp, though he might talk easily of witches, was a scientist to the depths of his soul.

And what he—Marson—might have to do, must not be endangered by the knowledge that some practical, doubting person—anyone—suspected the truth. The mere existence of suspicion would corrode his will, and, in the final issue, undermine his decision to act.

He heard himself muttering words of thanks; minutes later, on his way, he was thinking miserably: What could he say, how could he convince Joanna that the old woman must be gotten rid of?

And there was one more thing that he had to clear up before he would dare risk everything in the only, unilateral action that remained. One more thing— All Saturday morning, the sun shone brilliantly, but by afternoon black clouds rode above his racing car. At six in the evening it rained bitterly for ten minutes; and then, slowly, the sky cleared.

His first view of the village was from the hill, and that, he thought, relieved, should make it easier. From a group of trees, he surveyed the little sprawl of houses and buildings. It was the church that confused him at first.

He kept searching in its vicinity with his field glasses. And it was nearly half an hour before he was convinced that what he sought was not there. Twilight was thick over the world now, and that brought surging panic. He couldn’t possibly dare to go down to the village, and inquire where the graveyard was. Yet—hurry, hurry!

Genuinely unsettled physically, he walked deeper into the woods along the edge of the hill. There was a jutting point of ground farther along, from where he would be able to sweep the countryside. These villages sometimes had their graveyards a considerable distance away and— The little roadway burst upon him abruptly, as he emerged from the brush; and there a few scant feet away was a trellised gate. Beyond it, in the gathering shadows, simple crosses gleamed; an angel stood whitely, stiffly, poised for flight; and several great, shining granite stones reared rigidly from a dark, quiet earth.

Night lay black and still on the graveyard when his cautiously used flashlight at last picked out the headstone he craved. The inscription was simple:

Mrs. Quigley
Died July 7, 1941
Over 90 years old

He went back to the car, and got the shovel; and then he began to dig. The earth was strong; and he was not accustomed to digging. After an hour, he had penetrated about a foot and a half.

Breathless, he sank down on the ground, and for a while he lay there under the night sky with its shifting panoply of clouds. A queer, intellectual remembrance came that the average weight of university presidents and high school principals was around one hundred eighty pounds, according to Young.

But the devil of it was, he thought grimly, it was all weight and no endurance. Nevertheless, he had to go on, if it took all night.

At least, he was sure of one thing—Joanna wasn't home. It had been a tough job persuading her to accept that weekend invitation alone, tougher still to lie about the duties that would take him out of the city until Sunday morning; and he had had to promise faithfully that he would drive out Sunday to get her.

The simplest thing of all had been getting the young girl to look after the old woman over the weekend and— The sound of a car passing brought him to his feet in one jerky movement. He frowned. It wasn't that he was worried, or even basically alarmed. His mind felt rock-steady; his determination was an unshaken thing. Here in this dark, peaceful setting, disturbance was as unlikely as his own ghoullike incursion. People simply didn't come to graveyards at night.

The night sped, as he dug on and on, deeper, nearer to that secret he must have before he could take the deadly action that logic dictated even now. And he didn't feel like a ghoul— There was no feeling at all, only his purpose, his grim unalterable purpose; and there was the dark night, and the quietness, broken only by the swish of dirt flung upward and outward. His life, his strength flowed on here in this little, tree-grown field of death; and his watch showed twenty-five minutes to two when at last the spade struck wood.

It was after two when his flashlight peered eerily into the empty wooden box.

For long seconds, he stared; and now that the reality was here, he didn't know what he had expected. Obviously, only too obviously, an image had been buried here—and vanished gleefully as the dirt began to thud in the filling of the grave.

But why a burial at all? Who was she trying to fool? What?

His mind grew taut. Reasons didn't matter now. He knew; that was what counted. And his actions must be as cold and deadly, as was the purpose of the creature that had fastened itself on his household.

His car glided onto the deserted early morning highway. The gray dawn came out of the east to meet him, as he drove; and only his dark purpose, firmer, icier each minute, an intellectualized thing as unquenchable as sun fire, kept him companion.

It was deep into the afternoon when his machine, in its iron-throated second gear, whirred up the steep hill, and twisted into the runway that led to the garage.

He went into the house, and for a while he sat down. The girl whom Joanna had left in charge was a pretty, red-haired thing named Helen. She was quite fragilely built, he noted with grim approval; he had suggested her for the weekend with that very smallness in mind. And yes, she wouldn't mind staying another night, if they didn't come home. And when was he leaving to get his wife?

"Oh, I'm going to have a nap first," Marson replied. "Had rather a hard drive. And you -. . What are you going to do while I sleep?"

"I've found some magazines," the girl said. "I'm going to sit here and read. I'll keep very quiet, I assure you."

"Thank you," Marson said. "It's just for a couple of hours, you know."

He smiled bleakly to himself, as he went into the bedroom, and closed the door.

Men with desperate plans had to be bold, had to rely on the simplest, most straightforward realities of life—such as the fact that people normally stayed away from cemeteries at night. And those young women didn't make a nuisance of themselves by prowling around when they had promised not to.

He took off his shoes, put on his slippers, and then— Five long minutes he waited to give her time to settle down. Finally, softly, he went through the bathroom door that led to the hallway that connected the kitchen and the bedrooms. The kitchen door creaked as he went out, but he allowed himself no qualms; not a trace of fear entered into the ice-cold region that was his brain.

Why should a girl, comfortably seated, reading an absorbing story, tied by a promise to be silent—why should such a girl investigate an ordinary sound? Even new houses were notoriously full of special noises.

The car was parked at the side of the house, where there was only one window. He took the five gallon tin of gasoline out of the back seat, carried it through the kitchen, down into the basement. He covered it swiftly with some old cloth, then he was up again, through the kitchen— He reached the bedroom, thinking tensely: It was these details that must paralyze most people planning murder. Tonight when he came back, he wouldn't be able to drive the car up the hill, because it was to be a very special, unseen, ghostly trip. The car would be parked at least a mile away; and, obviously, it would be fantastically risky, and tiring, to lug a five gallon tin of gas a whole mile through back alleys.

And what a nightmare it would be to blunder with such a tin through the kitchen and into the basement at midnight. Impossible too, he had found, to get it past Joanna without her seeing.

Murder had its difficulties; and quite simply of course, murder it must be. And by fire. All that he ever remembered about witches showed the overwhelming importance of fire. And just let lightly built Helen try to break down the old woman's door after the fire had started and he had locked that door from the outside— He lay for a while quietly on the bed; and the thought came that no man would seem a greater scoundrel than he if all that he had done and all that he intended was ever found out.

For a moment, then, a fear came black as pitch; and as if the picture was there before his eyes, he saw the great school slipping from him, the greater college beyond fading like the dream it was, fading into the mists that surrounded a prison cell.

He thought: It would be so easy to take half measures that would rid him and Joanna of the terrible problem. All he needed to do next day was to take her to the Old Folks Home, while Joanna was still away—and ruthlessly face down all subsequent objections.

She would escape perhaps, but never back to them.

He could retreat, then, into his world of school and Joanna; existence would flow on in its immense American way—and somewhere soon there would be a young woman witch, glowing with the strength of ancient, evil life renewed; and somewhere too there would be a human soul shattered out of its lawful body, a home where an old woman had blatantly, skillfully, intruded.

Knowing what he did, and doing nothing short of—everything!

He must have slept on that thought, the demanding sleep of utterly weary nerves, unaccustomed to being denied their rest. He wakened with a shock. It was pitch dark, he saw, and— The bedroom door opened softly. Joanna came tiptoeing in. She saw him by the light that streamed from the hall. She stopped and smiled. Then she came over and kissed him.

"Darling," she said, "I'm so glad you hadn't started out to get me. A delightful couple offered to drive me home, and I thought, if we met you on the way, at least it would have saved you that much

anyway, after your long, tiring weekend. I've sent Helen home; it's after eleven, so just undress and go straight to bed. I'm going to have a cup of tea myself; perhaps you'd like one too."

Her voice barely penetrated through the great sounds that clanged in his brain, the pure agony of realization.

After eleven—less than an hour to the midnight that, once a year, began the fatal period of the witch's moon. The whole world of his plans was crashing about his ears.

He hovered about her, while she put the kettle on. It was half past eleven when they finished the tea; and still he couldn't speak, couldn't begin to find the beginning that would cover all the things that had to be said. Wretchedly, he grew aware of her eyes watching him, as she puffed at her cigarette.

He got up, and started to pace the floor; and now there was dark puzzlement in her fine brown eyes. Twice, she started to speak, but each time cut herself off.

And waited. He could almost feel her waiting in that quiet, earnest way of hers, waiting for him to speak first.

The impossibility, he thought then, the utter impossibility of convincing this calm, practical, tender-hearted wife of his. And yet, it had to be done, now before it was too late, before even all-out effort would be too little.

The recurrence of that phrase from the editorial started a streak of cold perspiration down his face. He stopped short, stopped in front of her; and his eyes must have been glaring pools, his rigid posture terrifying; for she shrank the faintest bit.

"Craig—"

"Joanna, I want you to take your hat and coat and go to a hotel."

It needed no imagination to realize that his words must sound insane. He plunged on with the volubility of a child telling an exciting story. And that was the way he felt—like a child talking to a tolerant grownup. But he couldn't stop. He omitted only his grim murder purpose. She would have to absorb the shock of that later when it was all over. When he had finished, he saw that her gaze was tender.

"You poor darling," she said, "so that's what's been bothering you. You were worried about me. I can just see how everything would work on your mind. I'd have felt the same, if it was you apparently in danger."

Marson groaned. So that was the angle she was taking— sweet understanding; humoring his natural alarm; believing not a word. He caught his mind into a measure of calm; he said in a queer, shaky voice:

"Joanna, think of Kemp's definite analysis of it as witch's weed, and the fact the body is not in the grave—"

Still there was no fire in her eyes, no flame of basic fear. She was frowning; she said:

"But why would she have to go to all that trouble of burying one of her images, when all she had to do was get on the train and come here? Physically, that is what she did; why that enormous farce of a burial?"

Marson flared: "Why the lie she told me about having put make-up on someone else, who was buried there? Oh, darling, don't you see—"

Slowly, reasonably, Joanna spoke again: “There may have been some connivance, Craig, perhaps between the man, Pete Cole, who wrote you the letter, and Mother Quigley. Have you thought of that?”

If she bad been with him, he thought, when he opened that dark grave. If she had seen the incredible image—If, if, if— He stole a glance at the clock on the wall. It was seventeen minutes to twelve, and that nearly twisted his brain. He shuddered—and fought for control of his voice. There were arguments he could think of, but the time for talk was past— far past. Only one thing mattered.

“Joanna,” he said, and his voice was so intense that it shocked him, “you’ll go to the hotel for three days, for my sake?”

“Why, of course, darling.” She looked serene, as she stood up. “My night bag is still packed. I’ll just take the car and—”

A thought seemed to strike her. Her fine, clear brow creased. “What about you?”

“I’ll stay here of course,” he said, “to see that she stays here. You can phone me up at the school tomorrow. Hurry, for Heaven’s sake.”

He felt chilled by the way her gaze was appraising him. “Just a minute,” she said, and her voice was slow, taut. “Originally, you planned to have me out of the way only till tomorrow. What—are you—planning to do—tonight?”

His mind was abruptly sullen, rebellious; his mouth awkward, as if only the truth could come easily from it. Lies had always been hard for him. But he tried now, pitifully:

“All I wanted was to get you out of the way, while I visited the grave. I didn’t really figure beyond that.”

Her eyes didn’t believe him; her voice said so, but just what words she used somehow didn’t penetrate; for an odd steadiness was coming to him, realization that the time must be only minutes away, and that all this talk was worthless. Only his relentless purpose mattered. He said simply, almost as if he were talking to himself:

“I intended to lock her door from the outside, and burn the house, but I can see now that isn’t necessary. You’d better get going, darling, because this is going to be messy; and you mustn’t see it. You see, I’m going to take her out to the cliff’s edge, and throw her to the night sea she fears so violently.”

He stopped because the clock, incredibly, said eight minutes to twelve. Without a sound, without waiting for the words that seemed to quiver on her lips, he whirled and raced into the bedroom corridor. He tried the old woman’s door. It was locked. A very fury of frustation caught at his throat.

“Open up!” he roared.

There was silence within; he felt Joanna’s fingers tugging futilely at his sleeve. And then he was flinging the full weight of his one hundred eighty pounds at that door. Two bone wrenching thrusts—and it went down with an ear-splitting crash.

His fingers fumbled for the light switch. There was a click, and then— He stopped, chilled, half paralyzed by what the light revealed: Twelve old women, twelve creatures snarling at him from every part of the room.

The witch was out in the open—and ready.

The queerest thing of all in that tremendous moment was the sheer, genuine glow of triumph that swept him—the triumph of a man who has indisputably won an argument with his wife. He felt a crazy, incredible joy; he wanted to shout:

"See! see! wasn't I right? Wasn't it exactly as I told you?"

With an effort, he caught his whirling mind; and the shaky realization came that actually he was on the verge of madness. He said unsteadily:

"This is going to take a little time. I'll have to carry them one by one to the cliff; and the law of averages says that I'll strike the right one sooner or later. We won't have to worry about her slipping away in between, because we know her horrible fear of the night. It's only a matter of perseverance—"

His voice faltered the faintest bit; for suddenly the ghastly reality of what was here struck his inner consciousness. Some of the creatures sat on the bed, some on the floor; two stood, their arms around each other; and half of them were gibbering now in a fantastic caricature of terror. With a start, he grew aware of Joanna behind him.

She was pale, incredibly pale, for Joanna; and her voice, when she spoke, quavered; she said:

"The trouble with you, Craig, is that you're not practical. You want to do physical things like throwing her onto the rocks at the bottom of the cliff, or burning her. It proves that even yet your basic intellect doesn't believe in her. Or you'd know what to do."

She had been pressing against him, staring wide-eyed over his shoulder at that whimpering, terrified crew. Now, before he could realize her intention, she slipped under his arm, and was into the room.

Her shoulder bumped him slightly as she passed, and threw him off balance. It was only for a moment, but when he could look again, eight squalling crones had Joanna surrounded.

He had a brief glimpse of her distorted face. Six gnarled hands were clawing to open her mouth; a tangle of desperate old women's hands were clutching at her arms and her legs, trying to hold her flailing, furious body.

And they were succeeding! That was the terrifying reality that drove him into the midst of that brew of old women with battering fists—and pulled Joanna clear.

Immense anger grew out of his fear. "You silly fool!" he raged. "Don't you realize it must be after midnight?"

Then, with an abrupt, fuller realization that she had actually been attacked, piercingly:

"Are you all right?"

"Yes." Shakily. "Yes."

But she would have said that too. He glared at her with mad eyes, as if by the sheer intensity of his gaze, he would see through her face into her brain. She must have seen his terrible thought in his straining countenance, for she cried:

"Don't you see, darling? The blinds, the windows—pull them up. That's what I intended to do. Let in the night; let in the things she fears. If she exists, then so must they. Don't you see?"

He took Joanna with him, kicking at the creatures with his fists and his feet, with a grim, merciless ferocity. He tore the blind from its hooks; one thrust of his foot smashed the whole lower pane of the window. And then, back at the door, they waited.

Waited!

There was a whisper of water splattering on the window sill. A shape without shape silhouetted abnormally against the blue-black sky beyond the window. And then, the water was on the floor, trickling from a misty shape that seemed to walk. A voice sighed, or was it a thought:

"You nearly fooled us, Niyashac with that, false burial. We lost sight of you for months. But we knew that only by the sea and from the sea could your old body draw the strength for the change. We watched, as we have so long for so many of the traitors; and so at last you answer the justice of the ancient waters."

There was no sound but the sibilation of water trickling. The old women were silent as stones; and they sat like birds fascinated by snakes. And suddenly, the images were gone, snuffed out. One fragile, lonely-looking old woman sat on the floor directly in the path of the mist-thing. Almost primly, she gathered her skirts about her.

The mist enveloped her form. She was lifted into it, then instantly dropped. Swiftly, the mist retreated to the window. It was gone. The old woman lay flat on her back, eyes open and staring; her mouth open, too, unprettily.

That was the over-all effect—the utter lack of anything beautiful.

THE END.